

AMERICAN WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICAN
ART POTTERY 1873 - 1889

by

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INTRODUCTION

This research deals with the beginnings on the American art pottery movement 1873 - 1889 and the earliest attempts to employ ceramics as an independent art medium in the United States by American women. American pottery of 1873 - 1889 may seem to be a short period of time but it is a rich segment within the history of American clay. This period of time is often misunderstood and unrecognized in terms of its achievements, uniqueness and tradition.

This phase of American art pottery covers three important developments: Initially there was the first mature creative use of the technique which was later to become known as the "Cincinnati faience," secondly the founding of Rookwood Pottery in 1880, and in 1889, the first international recognition of American art pottery. These achievements were largely the result of the efforts of socially prominent women -- Mary Louise McLaughlin, Maria Longworth Nichols, Clara Newton and Laura Fry -- central figures in the Cincinnati women's art movement. These American women artists were selected for this research because of the extent to which their work has commanded critical attention and has contributed to the American aesthetic.

Throughout civilization clay objects have functioned both as utilitarian vessels and as objects of art. Although technological progress has diminished the role of the ceramist as the producer of society's functional vessels, the creative use of ceramics still remains significant within society.

American pottery of the early 1800's grew from foreign influences. Europeans who settled the United States found the indigenous Indian pottery archaic and protected by tribal cultures. (1) The transplanted Europeans found little inspiration in Indian traditions and attempted to emulate the styles, processes, and tastes of their origins. Some of the dominant influences were the German salt-glazed ware, the Dutch slip-wares, the creamware of Staffordshire and the porcelains of Germany, France and England. The American style became patently imitative, lacking formal skills, craftsmanship and the foundation of an established national aesthetic identity.

The phenomenon of American art pottery was not directly influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement, popular in England from 1880 - 1914. (2) It began as an outgrowth of the pervasive nineteenth century concept that handiwork activities were a suitable occupation for young women. The production of handiwork was one of the few ways in which women could distinguish themselves. Such skills

were taught in the home, the school and through the medium of ladies' books and magazines. Handiwork was an established part of many of the woman's social life and manifested itself in activities such as the quilting bee. Therefore, long before the appearance of the Arts and Crafts Movement in America, there was an extensive and well established tradition of decorative handiwork among American women.

It was the third quarter of the nineteenth century when American potteries began to produce hand-decorated wares each being a one-of-a-kind item. These products came to be called art pottery and were appreciated for their aesthetic value as hand crafted objects. While there was a common spirit in the pottery, there was no unified style. Art pottery was characterized by an immense variety of shapes and decorations indicating many different influences. Among these influences were the early attempts to create art industries, the lure of Oriental design, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and later the look of French Art Nouveau as well as the stirrings of the studio-pottery movement.

Art pottery was produced in workshops or in small factories. Unlike industrial utilitarian wares, art pottery was generally used for decorative purposes. Most shapes were based on the utilitarian formats of vase, bowl,

pitcher, or lampbase. Although art pottery had an implied purpose as a vessel, this purpose could easily be ignored.

In addition to these general characteristics, art pottery was the result of its time and place. It would not have been made if public tastemakers had not directed popular attention to the evils of industrialism and the moral benefits of handicraftsmanship. It is unlikely that the art pottery movement could have survived had there not been a work force of women who had been trained from childhood to make decorative objects with their hands and who were ready to assert themselves in a commercial venture.

The interest in art pottery began in Cincinnati in 1873, when Maria Nichols and Mrs. Learner B. (Fanny Goodman) Harrison learned about china decoration from Karl Langenbeck, a boy in their neighborhood, who had received a set of German china paints as a gift. (4) In 1874, Ben Pitman, an instructor at the School of Design, brought back to Cincinnati from the east coast of America a number of china painting colours. He invited the lady members of his wood carving class (5) at the School of Design to participate in a china painting class. Marie Eggers, a young German lady who had learned something of the craft in her native country, was hired by Pitman, out of his own pocket, to instruct them. (6) The course was a popular

success, although Ms. Eggers knew little more of the technique than her students. (7)

Pitman encouraged the ladies to experiment with the novel art. "The course was not intended to train working women for a career, but was specifically aimed at socially prominent women who wished to perfect a pasttime." (8) "The group showed great enthusiasm, probably creating in the community the idea that decorating ceramic wares was 'an amusement of the idle rich'..." (9) Enthusiasm grew, the class expanded and became increasingly serious and in several cases inaugurated highly successful careers as ceramists. Among the pupils at the start were Clara Chipman Newton and Mary Louise McLaughlin.

Shortly after Marie Eggers began teaching this group she died, and the budding female artists were again on their own. McLaughlin, Fletcher, Holabird and Newton worked in a small room at the School of Design until the authorities evicted them; the unauthorized activity of china painting was not part of the school's curriculum, and was forbidden on the premises. (10)

Restricted from leading active careers by the nineteenth century social mores, many women found the decorative arts the only outlet for their creative energies. Seeking a space to exhibit their handicrafts, a group of Philadelphia women organized a campaign to obtain

permission to display their work at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876. The women set to work after being informed that if they wished to exhibit, they would have to finance and construct their own building. (11) Among the fund-raising activities that led to the successful completion of the building was an anniversary of the Boston Tea Party, held in Philadelphia on December 17, 1873. This celebration included tea in special teacups which could be purchased as souvenirs and was offered by ladies costumed as Martha Washington. (12) The part was a great success and benefit tea parties became extremely popular.

To finance their own art exhibit in Philadelphia, a group of Cincinnati, Ohio, women held a Centennial Tea Party in Cincinnati on February 22, 1875. (13) This part differed from its predecessors by featuring teacups that had been decorated by the women themselves. Using factory blanks and china paints, the ladies produced appropriately patriotic cups, embellished with the American flag and the signatures of Martha and George Washington. These cups were very popular. Miss Newton claimed that these cups "...really represented the origin of porcelain painting by amateurs in this country..." (14)

The Philadelphia Centennial acted as a catalyst to transform these early, crude attempts of pottery decoration

into something more nearly akin to fine art. The artistic activities of the Cincinnati women flourished as the Centennial approached.

In 1876, able to use only the overglaze painting technique, the Cincinnati women sent painted china to be exhibited alongside carved wood, needlework, and watercolors displayed in the Cincinnati Room of the Women's Pavilion, which was reserved for the exhibit from the Cincinnati School of Design, under the sponsorship of the Cincinnati Women's Centennial Committee. (15) Although these objects lacked formal accomplishment -- and at times showed unfortunate lapses of taste -- they did represent one of the earliest attempts to employ ceramics as an independent art medium in the United States. (16) They were the seeds of an American aesthetic and the first sign of a spirit of invention and achievement that was to lead to the founding of the art pottery movement in the United States.

This exhibition proved crucially influential for a number of women through its foreign ceramic entries, particularly those of oriental pottery which, although known in America, achieved wider appreciation through the Centennial Exhibition. Maria Longworth Nichols, the future founder of the Rookwood Pottery, while not herself an exhibitor, was strongly influenced by the Japanese exhibit.

(17) The women, particularly Louise McLaughlin, were also impressed by the French barbotine ware, a type of underglaze painting which coloured slips that had been developed by Ernest Chaplel at Bourg-la-Reine and then used by him at the Haviland factory at Auteuil. (Figure 1) Writing prophetically about what he called the "Limoges faience," R.H. Soden Smith of the South Kensington Museum (The Victoria and Albert Museum) hailed the artistic excellence of the work and suggested that "it is not impossible that it will have an art influence on our time."

(18) Prophetic indeed were the words. Barbotine ware became the vogue in Europe for a time, but the interest was short-lived. In the United States the variants of this technique were the basis for the early pioneering by McLaughlin and Rookwood Pottery, and became entrenched until the early twentieth century as the dominant technique in American art pottery.

After the Centennial Exhibition, American ceramists responded to what they had seen with increased activity. In Cincinnati, Louise McLaughlin continued her work in china painting and published China Painting - A Practical Manual for the Use of Amateurs in the Decoration of Hard Porcelain in 1877. In this book, she made a plea for a professional approach to the art, which she observed was "peculiarly fitted to be an agreeable pastime for persons

of leisure." (19) She cautioned, "there is, however, too general a tendency to consider it simply in the light of an amusement, unworthy of serious study, and an art for the practice of which no special training or knowledge is necessary." (20)

Louise McLaughlin continued experimenting with underglaze painting, searching for the secret of the Haviland method. She was already aware of the basic principles involved and as early as 1875 had experimented with underglaze cobalt blue on porcelain blanks fired at Thomas C. Smith and Sons' Union Porcelain Works at Greenpoint, Long Island. (21) On the basis of this experience, she formulated a naive but not totally inaccurate theory which approximated the carefully guarded secret of the Limoges process used at Haviland. Her developments in underglazing were slightly different than Haviland's and created some technical problems which she eventually surmounted. McLaughlin's underglaze faience technique employed mineral colours mixed with an unfired clay slip which was then applied to a damp body; Haviland's process used finely ground fired clay made into a slip and applied to a thoroughly dry piece. This is significant in view of later disagreements about the origins of the underglaze technique in Cincinnati. All the local potteries, including the Rookwood Pottery, used Louise

McLaughlin's method rather than the French one, which proved conclusively from whom it had originated. (22)

Having achieved success, in 1877, with underglaze using cobalt blue on a stoneware blank from the Frederick Dallas Pottery, (Figure 3) McLaughlin continued to pursue the underglaze faience technique. In September of that year at the P.L. Coultry Company, a commercial pottery, she used a common yellow ware teapot without its spout and handle and painted it while moist with her colored clay slip. This piece was not a success, for when it was drawn from the kiln it was evident that her slip application was too thin; it did, however, establish that her technique could produce effects similar to Haviland. In January 1878 her first successful piece, a pilgrim jar, was produced. (23) (Figure 4) The first exhibition of these wares took place in May 1878 at the Women's Art Museum Association. In October of that same year, she also exhibited her work at the Loan Exhibition of Decorative Art in New York. The following year she won an honorable mention at the Paris Exposition Universells. (24)

Louise McLaughlin's work won her quick recognition and extravagant praise. One newspaper correspondent gushed:

It is a triumph of which any woman may well be proud, and proves conclusively that we have here in America the artistic feeling which demands and the genius which is able to produce, genuine art works. (25)

The correspondent felt that McLaughlin's discovery had a practical as well as an aesthetic value "...since any artistic value that can be put into work raised the grade of manufacturers, and thereby increases the national wealth." The writer's nationalism was obvious: "what we want in American art is individuality, and not servile imitation of foreign products..." (26) Another account of McLaughlin's discovery stressed the American aspect:

Whatever the Cincinnati faience may indicate in other ways, it appears as a purely American achievement, and is for that reason full of suggestiveness to the reflective. (27)

Apparently the "reflective" should begin to realize the possibilities of art as a field for American endeavor.

The search for leisure occupation, and probably the influence of the decorative art fad, drew a number of "women of leisure" to the commercial potteries. A small group joined Louise McLaughlin at the Coultry Pottery and apparently looked to her for leadership. On April 1, 1879, Louise McLaughlin along with a select group of ladies interested in decorative art formed the Pottery Club which became an important factor in the ceramic art industry in Cincinnati. The Pottery Club, the first club of its kind, served as a model for pottery associations that opened in Chicago, New York and other parts of the country. More

broadly it contributed to the growth of the arising women's movement.

From the members within its ranks, three officers were elected: Miss Louise McLaughlin, president; Miss Clara Chipman Newton, secretary; and Miss Alice Belle Holabird, treasurer. These three remained officers throughout the Club's existence. In addition to those already named, the following ladies comprised the original membership: Mrs. C.A. Plimpton, Mrs. E.G. Leonard, Miss Mary Spencer, Miss Agnes Pitman, Mrs. Frank R. Ellis, Mrs. Wm. Dodd, Miss Clara Fletcher, Mrs. George Dominick, and Miss Laura A. Fry. (28)

The membership of the new club was originally restricted to twelve, including honorary memberships. (29) The personnel fluctuated through the years, and the number later was increased to fifteen, and finally to twenty. Mrs. Nichols, an early Cincinnati china painter, was invited to join, but the invitation was somehow mislaid and never was delivered. She was irritated by this supposed personal slight and refused later invitation to join the club. This planted the seeds of a rivalry between the Club and Mrs. Nichols. (30)

The pottery Club originally met in the studios of the Coultry Pottery; six months later they moved to the Dallas Pottery. Besides heading the Pottery Club, Louise

McLaughlin also taught a class at the Coultry Pottery. (Figure 5) She taught her underglaze process to her pupils, some of whom were young men who would later become decorators at the Rookwood Pottery. (31)

Because the activities of the women were centered in the industrial potteries, an important shift from china painting to pottery decoration took place. No longer were they decorating porcelain factory blanks supplied by American firms like the Union Porcelain Works or by European companies; the ladies began designing and decorating local earthenware and stoneware bodies. Not dependent on forms made from foreign or unknown clays, the decorators began to consider the role of the clay body as well as that of the decorative glaze that covered it, signifying an important step in the growth from china painting as a genteel hobby towards a more professional approach to pottery manufacturing. (32)

A cooperative relationship with these industrial potteries was necessary for another reason -- not only were materials and working space available, but male workers were also on hand to throw the shapes. It was not until the twentieth century that it became acceptable for women to perform the laborious tasks of throwing shapes and making clay. In some cases, drawings of the desired forms were given to the potter, although often the technicians

produced shapes independently. The fact that these women frequented the male-dominated potteries was a mark of their dedication. Mrs. Aaron Perry remarked in an article in Harper's New Monthly Magazine, "It is an interesting commentary upon the occupations of our women that the dusty quarters of the manufacturers of iron-stone and Rockingham should be the point of attraction for so many of the refined and cultivated women of the city." (33)

Work done by the Pottery Club reflected the popular tastes during the period. Decorations were often based on floral motifs. The efforts of the Cincinnati ladies had far-reaching appeal. Women from neighboring cities came to Cincinnati for lessons in china painting. Even work from as far away as Michigan and New York was sent to Cincinnati to be fired. A variety of techniques including over-glaze painting, incised decoration, relief design, and decoration under the glaze were practiced. (Examples of early Art Pottery - Figures 5, 6, 7, 17, 18, 21)

Meanwhile, spurning continued offers to join the Pottery Club, Maria Longworth Nichols continued her own pottery activities. Maria found her own pottery quarters at the Hamilton Road Pottery of Frank Dallas. (Figure 8 & 9) Ironically, in the autumn of 1879, the Cincinnati Pottery Club also moved to the Dallas Pottery.

Louise McLaughlin discovered that the P.L. Coultry Pottery had gone into partnership with Thomas V. Wheatley and that her secrets were being revealed. Wheatley was claiming to have originated the underglaze method himself in New York. Despite the fact that he took out a patent on the method in June 1880, no one believed him. Records were unable to prove that Louise had produced her underglaze decorated pots in the autumn of 1877, while Wheatley's earliest pieces dated from April 1879. Following a fruitless attempt in the autumn of 1880 to prevent both Louise McLaughlin and Maria Nichols from using the method, he soon dropped his claim. (34)

At the Dallas Pottery the two different groups of decorators worked separately and the rivalry, now centered around Louise McLaughlin and Maria Nichols, continued. Special works done by the ladies frequently suffered in the Dallas kilns, which were built and fired to make commercial ware. Louise McLaughlin had a special kiln built to order at her expense to accommodate the underglaze firing. (35) Working quite separately from the Club, and not to be outdone, Maria Nichols (who was working with Jane P. Dodd) built a kiln, said to be the largest in the country, for overglazed pieces. (36) Experiments were conducted with great vigor and rapid improvement. The work of the lady decorators drew much attention, and crowds made the trip to

the Dallas Pottery to see the new American art for themselves. So many people came to see the Pottery club in action that it interfered with the work. The Club, therefore, decided to hold an annual reception and to restrict visitors at other times.

The Club held its first Annual Reception and Exhibition on May 29, 1880, and the event was a considerable success. Enough work was sold to balance the budget of the club for a year. An artist representing Harper's Weekly was in attendance at that reception and the wood engraving of the show that appeared in the May 29th issue of the magazine was the first national acknowledgement of the ceramics movement. (37) (Figure 7)

Mrs. Nichols found it discouraging to work at the Dallas pottery. She could not tolerate the limits it imposed on her ambitious experiments; even the special kiln she had built was not enough for her. In 1880 she established Rookwood Pottery. (Figure 12) A contemporary newspaper correspondent asked Mrs. Nichols why she founded the Rookwood Pottery. Her answer was short and to the point, "... my principal object is my own gratification." She also hoped to make the Pottery pay for itself. (38)

Other people felt that secondary motives were also involved in the founding of the Pottery. Louise McLaughlin thought that Mrs. Nichols had personal problems:

...the fact that she was not happily married to Geo. Ward Nichols ... was the original cause of the starting of Rookwood Pottery. Her father ... did not approve of divorce and his influence and authority, and his efforts to assist his daughter prevented her from divorcing Nichols. (39)

Louise McLaughlin also thought that Mrs. Nicholas was "...a spoiled child ... who generally got what she desired as soon as it could be procured for her ..." (40) The harshness of this judgment may have been influenced by the bad feelings that existed between the two women because of the disputes over McLaughlin's process. Others shared the view that Mrs. Nichols was indulged by her parents. She pressured Joseph Longworth to comply with her wishes, and she did get her own way. (41)

Other factors may also have contributed to Mrs. Nichols' determination to get her own pottery. One account mentioned the distance she had to travel to the Dallas Pottery. She also wanted to decide for herself the form upon which she would work rather than have to depend on those on hand at Dallas. (42)

This same account pointed out the unusual situation involved in Mrs. Nichols' interest in starting a pottery:

That a lady of Mrs. Nichols' wealth, culture, and social standing should wish to embark in so singular a business venture is remarkable. (43)

Remarkable, perhaps, but not surprising in view of her ambitions. She did not work for profit, nor did she do it

for "idle amusement." Rather she was driven by her need to carry out her "artistic projects." Rookwood Pottery would provide the necessary facilities. (44) Envy of Louise McLaughlin and the Pottery Club may have also spurred her to create her own establishment.

Mrs. Nichols supposedly wanted a place where art took precedence over profits. It had become obvious that the production of arty ceramics required its own pottery, "... where the art output might be the first, the commercial output might be the second consideration." (45) She could well afford that indulgence. From the beginning, some commercial ware was always produced, and Mrs. Nichols later changed her mind about financial success. (Figure 13) With the financial backing of the Longworth family, she was able to secure the services of the most competent local ceramic workers, and the pottery itself was able to survive the debacle so common to less well-endowed establishments. "It was at first," wrote Mrs. Nichols, "an expensive luxury for which I, luckily, could afford to pay." (46)

First located in the old schoolhouse at 207 Eastern Avenue, Cincinnati, the pottery was named "Rookwood." In naming the Pottery, Mrs. Nichols showed shrewdness and sentimentality. She thought "Rookwood" would remind potential customers of Wedgwood, a world famous pottery.

Rookwood was also the name of her father's estate, where she had spent her childhood. (47)

The advantages of her father's wealth, as well as his sympathy and her own social standing, allowed Mrs. Nichols to do what was then impossible for most women of her time, that was, to establish her own pottery industry. Her work was even seen as charitable for she "follows the traditions of her family in devotion to the well-being and advancements of her native place;" (48) there were sentiments often used to justify the social work of moral rehabilitation expected of English middle and upper-class women. Such concerns were not the uppermost in Maria Nichols' mind.

Mrs. Nichols kept on with her project and on Thanksgiving Day, 1880, the first ware was drawn from the kiln. The products contained within the kiln probably included art pottery, commercial, undecorated ware, and amateur work -- Mrs. Nichols supplied amateurs with pieces which were decorated and were subsequently fired in the Rookwood kilns. (49)

The Pottery received a great deal of free publicity during its early days. Mrs. Nichols said: "I don't suppose any undertaking ever had so much gratuitous advertising as the Rookwood Pottery because it was a woman's." (50) Clara Newton noted the same phenomenon:

That a woman should undertake such a project was not only new in our country, it had in it also an element of the picturesque that fascinated the imagination. (51)

Perhaps some of the people who read about the Pottery thought it marked an advance for womankind; others probably regarded it as a anomie. For whatever reason, many visitors came to Rookwood and received a first-hand glimpse of the pottery. Both tourists and Cincinnati natives apparently found it fascinating to view a place where profit was secondary to art. Their visits perhaps, indicated a growing awareness of American art.

As a business, the Pottery's success was very slow. During its early days, Joseph Longworth bore the financial burden, paying both for the running expenses and experimentation.

The earliest pieces made at Rookwood reflected Nichols' continuing interest in Japanese shapes and decoration as well as in Near Eastern shapes. Vases were decorated with stylized, asymmetrical designs, often derived from Japanese prototypes. Unlike the products of the Pottery Club, Nichols' exhibited a strange fascination for the grotesque; her decorations incorporated Japanese-inspired fish, crabs, spiders, and bats. (52) (Figure 14 & 15)

In 1881 the Pottery began to take on the look of a permanent industry. It was evident that philanthropy in the provision of suitable employment for needy ladies was not a consideration in the foundation of Rookwood; even the provision of facilities for lady-amateurs waned rapidly. In the summer of 1881 the Pottery enlarged its facilities; shortly after that Louise McLaughlin and the Pottery Club moved from Frank Dallas' premises to rent space at Rookwood. (53)

In October of the same year Mrs. Nichols decided to start a pottery school at Rookwood. She thought it would help support Rookwood financially, as well as provide training and experience for future artists. Clara Newton (Figures 16 - 20) and Laura Fry (Figures 21 - 23) undertook the teaching tasks. The school charged three dollars weekly tuition, or a dollar per hour for private lessons. The curriculum included underglaze and overglaze painting, and modeling. Classes started in October, drawing students from as far away as Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Cleveland. (54) It was soon evident that women who could afford the school's weekly fees of three dollars would hardly be willing to take up employment at Rookwood for the same wages. The average weekly wage was five dollars for men; women were usually paid at the lower rate. An exception to this was Marie's long time friend and schoolmate, Clara

Chipman Newton, who began work at Rookwood in April 1881 under the title "secretary" for a salary of \$27 a week. Her role was that of personal assistant to Mrs. Nichols. She was a talented decorator, having been in the first class under Ben Pitman in 1874. Newton undertook the school's classes in pottery decoration, while Laura Fry, who was among the first full-time paid decorators at Rookwood, taught modeling and Limoge work. (55)

Even though the Rookwood Pottery was expanding and selling as much pottery as it was producing, the firm was not financially successful. Mrs. Nichols' father, who had paid for the original equipment and building, continued backing the Pottery until his death in December 1883. (56)

In 1883 Mrs. Nichols employed a friend, William Watts Taylor, to take over the administration and organization of the Pottery, and to set it on a sound economic footing. He had no previous knowledge of the pottery business and his only concern was that of a businessman. He analyzed the many troubles besetting the Pottery and initiated changes. He suggested that the school be discontinued. It was losing money and was not likely to make any. He declared that it was useless as a training ground for future Rookwood artists. Most of the students at Rookwood School were probably lady amateurs who were not career minded, so Taylor's suggestion was quite sensible. Mrs. Nichols

apparently concurred willingly with the changes. She had her own problems with the lady amateurs; they told her they had lost interest in Rookwood because she had hired men, and that they wanted it to remain strictly women's work. Mrs. Nichols retorted that the opportunity was still there, "... but the workwomen are not to be found." (57) She could not locate women "... who combined the proper artistic ability and sufficient energy to come day after day and do a day's work. The men were more reliable, and they did not make ladylike excuses." (58) Maria knew of some exceptions, for more than half of Rookwood's decorators throughout its history were women.

The Pottery Club continued to use space at Rookwood; its members bought pieces for decoration and had them fired there. This caused some confusion. All biscuit wares were stamped with the name Rookwood plus the date; it was difficult to distinguish ware made by the amateurs from that made entirely by the Pottery.

The early products of the Cincinnati Pottery Club and the Rookwood Pottery were characterized by experimentation with underglaze slip decoration and exotic shapes. Through the influence of Oriental and Oriental-inspired European ceramics, decorators abandoned mid-Victorian compartmentalized design; instead of confining ornament to carefully defined compartments or bands, the designs were

allowed to flow freely over the entire shape. (5) This radical departure from established design theory gave the Cincinnati products a free, uncluttered look that reflected their Oriental inspiration. The underglaze slip technique of decoration contributed to the fluidity of design, for the slip could flow slightly during the fire. The technique was better suited to rhythmic, flowing designs rather than to geometrical decorations. The shapes were also more unified, fluid in design, free of angular compartments or bands. (60)

The Rookwood shape book was instituted to record the shapes produced at the Pottery. (61) The early Japanese-inspired motifs of dragons and serpents, so characteristic of Mrs. Nichols' first pieces, and the use of gilding gave way to simpler, more naturalistic treatment of plants and animals, while the underglaze painting process itself was further refined, thanks to the inventiveness of Laura Fry.

1883 was also the year Laura Fry introduced an atomizer to create smoother color transition. (Figure 24) Prior to this all color was laid in with a brush. This was the first use of the "spray gun" in American ceramics. Her innovation in pottery decoration soon became known as "Rookwood Standard." (62) Two years later she filed a

patent application for the process, and was awarded it in March 1889. (63)

In 1884, McLaughlin wrote a supplemental volume to her first manual, Suggestions to China Painters. (64) Results of further experience with earlier pottery techniques were included. Within a chapter on lessons to be learned from Japanese art, McLaughlin cautioned that Japanese ware was to be studied, not imitated. Although McLaughlin was not a teacher in the academic sense, her book provided a technical and artistic basis for women with no other source of information. (65)

In May 1884, Clara Newton resigned from Rookwood. She may have been influenced by Taylor's management and his treatment of the Pottery Club, for her allegiance to both the pottery Club and Rookwood proved incompatible.

Finally, in 1885, the Pottery Club and all amateurs were evicted from Rookwood. Taylor did not intend the Pottery to be used as an "outlet for genteel ladies with artistic learning," (66) nor to nurture potential rivals, like Louise McLaughlin. His intolerance and high-handed methods caused much resentment among the ladies affected. Many of the women decorators remained at Rookwood. Some, like Laura Fry, were distinctly important in their contributions to Rookwood's development. The fact that women were cheaper to hire than men was not doubt an

important factor in Taylor's continued use of women decorators at the Pottery. With the exclusion of women amateurs from Rookwood, artists such as Louise McLaughlin were forced to return to simpler, overglaze methods of decoration. Serious competition with Rookwood was virtually eliminated.

In 1885, Mrs. Nichols' husband, George Ward Nichols, died; his death caused speculation that the Pottery might close. The only apparent effect his death had was that his widow came less frequently to Rookwood. In May 1886, she married Bellamy Storer, (67) who had been one of the suitors for her hand in youth. From that date her active interest in Rookwood began to decline.

Rookwood developed into a professional firm of art pottery with a cohesive style and purpose by 1889 -- ending what might be termed the period of innocence of the art pottery movement. The coming of age was reached when Rookwood received a Gold Medal at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universells in competition with Europe's finest potteries. (68) This Exposition was a double triumph for American ceramics; McLaughlin was awarded a Silver Medal for her overglaze decoration with metallic effects. Through sheer naivete and empiric experiments, the art pottery movement's leaders had stumbled on a number of significant decorative techniques.

Thus, the amateur dabblings and valuable experiments of Louise McLaughlin, Maria Nichols, Laura Fry, and Clara Newton grew into an American aesthetic foundation. These dedicated and persevering women lead the way for American women to explore the possibilities of art pottery.

CONCLUSION

The American art pottery movement 1873 - 1889 flourished during the time when the United States was undergoing a transformation from a rural-agricultural society to an urban-industrial society. Women's work was an important part of that transformation, especially in their concern for the connection between art and industry. They reinforced industrialism by improving the quality of manufactured pottery and by trying to make industrial society palatable -- softened by art.

These women command attention through their achievements. Their contributions made at many levels included: the making of art pottery, writing about art, promoting art pottery by sharing their techniques and through their social activities. By today's standards their contributions may appear quaint. Their taste in art may seem crude and lacking in sophistication. However, considering some of the handicaps under which they worked -- faulty education, poor communications and transportation systems, and the restrictions of nineteenth century society -- it is amazing that they accomplished what they did. Much has happened in American pottery since the 1890's; still the contributions made by these women should not go unrecognized as a part of American ceramic heritage. They were the leaders and models which others followed.

This historical investigation was a journey of personal curiosity and purpose. Interested in women ceramic artists, I set on a quest to discover the American women who first contributed to American ceramics as an art medium. I wanted to know what contributions were made and their influences on ceramics.

From researching these women I cannot explain a direct influence on my work, yet many shared characteristics can be related to similar sources. The achievements of these women are part of the heritage of women working in ceramics today. For me the strongest felt influences are the spirit of inventiveness and perseverance.



FIGURE 1:

Japanese pottery and French "proces barbotine" wares by Haviland Auteuil in Paris, exhibited at the 1876 Centennial. Wood engraving reproduced from Harper's Weekly, November 25, 1876. Photograph: Museum of History and Technology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



FIGURE 2:

Mary Louise McLaughlin, 1880, photograph. Cincinnati Historical Society.



FIGURE 3:

The white background of this plate is decorated with painted blue underglaze decorations. It was made in 1877 and is 8 inches in diameter. A paper label on the plate says this is the first successful piece of underglaze blue decoration made by Louise McLaghlin.



FIGURE 4:

Louise McLaughlin, 1877-1878, pilgrim jar, earthenware. Painted with an underglaze slip decoration of a branch of rose blossoms in pink, black, and gray. This piece was the first successful example of Limoges ware done in Cincinnati, executed in late 1877, and drawn from the Patrick L. Coultry Pottery kiln in January 1878; it was the result of Louise McLaughlin's underglaze technique. Height 10 3/8 inches. Cincinnati Art Museum #1881.44.



FIGURE 5:

Louise McLaughlin, 1879, vase from Coultry or Dallas Pottery.

Decoration of roses, buds, and leaves in slight relief design; pale blue, blue grays, and light green slips on a red clay body. Height 8 1/2 inches. Diameter 5 3/4 inches. Cincinnati Museum of Art.



FIGURE 6:

Louise McLaughlin, 1880, Ali Baba Vase, made at Frederick Dallas Pottery. Made of red earthenware clay, decorated under a transparent glaze with colors mixed with white clay. The design is the Chinese Hibiscus flower, in dull red and yellow on a delicate sage green ground, delicately blended to a greenish white. Height 36 1/2 inches. Cincinnati Art Museum.



FIGURE 7:

Wood engraving of works in the First Annual Reception and Exhibition
of the Cincinnati Pottery Club at the Frederick Dallas Pottery, 1880.
Reproduced from Harper's Weekly, May 29, 1880. Photograph.
Cincinnati Art Museum.



FIGURE 8:

Maria Nichols, 1879, vase, from the Frederick Dallas Pottery.
Decoration in cobalt blue, of crans, bamboo, and grass on a white
clay body; gold accents around molded band on neck. Height
12 1/2 inches. Diameter 6 1/4 inches. Cincinnati Art Museum.



FIGURE 9:

Maria Nichols, 1878, 1880, porcelain vases. Decorated in underglaze colors and bold relief. The largest of these being 32 inches high. Cincinnati Museum of Art. 37

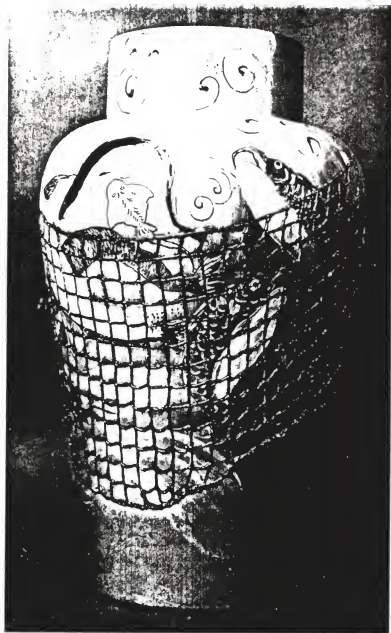


FIGURE 10:

Maria Nichols, 1880, vase. The design of marine life is painted with white slip in slight to high relief and covered with a gold fish net; a fan shaped decoration in on the opposite side. Height 30 inches. Diameter 18 inches. Private Collection.



FIGURE 11:

Maria Nichols, 1880, photograph. Cincinnati Historical Society.



FIGURE 12:

The Rookwood Pottery, Mount Adams, Cincinnati, from an illustration in the Art Journal of 1897.

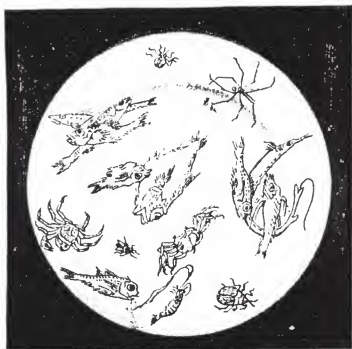


FIGURE 13:

Rookwood Plate, undated (around 1881). A specialty was first made of commercial ware for table and household purposes, the principal body used being intermediary between cream-colored and white granite wares. In 1881 considerable quantities of this ware was produced and in a variety of patterns, these were sold either in ivory finish or decorated with underglaze blue and brown prints of birds, fish, and other animal subjects. These, being artistic in form, are now difficult to procure.



FIGURE 14:

Maria Nichols, 1882, large bowl, underglaze decoration. Cincinnati Art Museum.



FIGURE 15:

Maria Nichols, 1882, basket, earthenware, made at Rookwood Pottery. Decoration painted in underglaze of spiders in a web, in beige, black, and white, with gilt overglaze. Cincinnati Art Museum.



FIGURE 16:

Clara Chipman Newton, photograph, undated. Newton was an early enthusiast of the arts in Cincinnati. A member of Ben Pitman's wood carving class at the Cincinnati School of design, she was among the first group of china painters in the class organized by Pitman. She actively participated in the Centennial tea party in Cincinnati, May 1875, which featured hand-painted teacups. Her work also was exhibited in the Women's Building of the Philadelphia Centennial. Beginning in 1881 she was employed at the Rookwood Pottery as secretary, a post she held until 1884.



FIGURE 17:

Clara Newton, 1874-1875. Chocolate pot, with marks of the cipher of a superimposed CCN: Xmas 1874 on the surface near base: May 1875 on front near foot. Overglaze design of an owl leading a chorus of singing birds; at top, banded design of three dragons and a bird. Shape is an identified factory blank. Height 6 3/4 inches. Diameter 5 1/2 inches. Cincinnati Museum of Art.



FIGURE 19:

Clara Newton, 1882. Horn pitcher, with painted underglaze decoration of dragonflies (on the side shown) and bamboo branches (on the other side), in browns, blues, black, and white, with gilt overglaze. This pot was decorated while Newton was working at Rookwood. It shows the influence of both the Japanese and the French. Height 6 1/2 inches. Brooklyn Museum, New York.



FIGURE 18:

Clara Newton, 1880, vase of white clay body produced at the Hamilton Road Pottery. Arabesque design applied to the bisque in cobalt blue and other colors under the glaze, finished with intersecting gilt lines and gold bands at the top and the bottom. Height 21 inches. Location unknown.



FIGURE 20:

Clara Newton, 1882. Teapot, early Rookwood, clear glaze and a bronze handle. Decoration consists of cherry blossom twigs, in tones of white, blue-gray and mahogany, in relief on pale mustard ground; highlights of burnt-siena and gold leaf. Inscribed, "Made by Clara Chipman Newton for Maria Longworth Nichols with deepest appreciation and affection, December 25, 1882." Height to lid is 5 1/2 inches, height to handle 8 1/2 inches. Diameter 7 1/4 inches.



FIGURE 21:

Laura Anne Fry was a charter member of the Cincinnati Pottery Club in 1878; two years later, when the decorating department was formally organized at Rookwood, she was a member and one of the few people who was associated with both the Pottery Club and the Rookwood Pottery. At Rookwood, Fry was one of the instructors in the School for Pottery Decoration and one of the few decorators who designed the shapes of early pieces. In July 1884 she introduced a method of applying background and decoration using an atomizer.



FIGURE 22:

Laura Fry, 1881, pitcher, Cincinnati Pottery Club. Incised decoration of ducks and water lilies in blue glaze. This piece was executed on a Rookwood blank but was decorated independently. Height 8 5/8 inches. Cincinnati Art Museum.

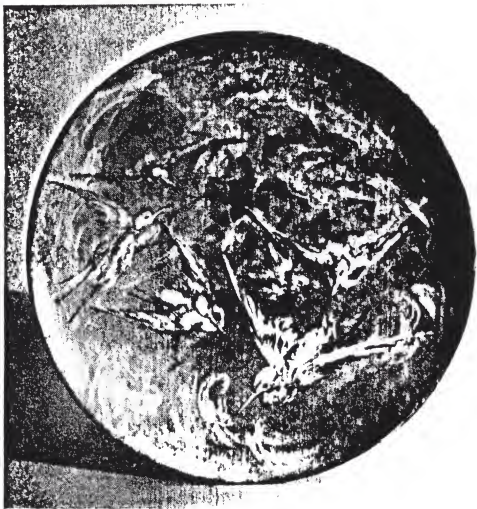


FIGURE 23:

Laura Fry, 1881, plaque, glazed earthenware. Diameter 14 3/4 inches. St. Louis Art Museum.



FIGURE 24:

Two examples of Rookwood Pottery, from an illustration in the Art Journal, 1897. The subtle background glazes on these shapes would have been applied using Fry's airbrush: the Japanese influenced decorative motifs of waterlilies and fish would then have been painted on and the whole item glazed and fired.

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AMERICAN WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICAN
ART POTTERY 1873 - 1889

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

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This research deals with the American Art Pottery Movement 1873 - 1889 and the earliest attempts to employ ceramics as an independent art medium by American women in the United States. Women selected were Mary Louise McLaughlin, Maria Longworth Nichols, Clara Newton and Laura Fry. Their contributions were made at many levels: the making of art pottery, writing about art, promoting art pottery by sharing their techniques and through their social activities. They were the leaders and models which others followed.